

# EASTERN MONITOR

## Western Balkans in the fight against the COVID-19: Another cause for democratic backsliding?

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- **The COVID-19 global pandemic represents an unprecedented challenge for humanity. Across the globe, countries are facing a historical dilemma of stricter security measures aimed to ensure safety of the populations at the cost of fundamental human rights and freedoms. The affected countries across the globe has adopted a wide scale of measures, and as there is no central mechanism for coordination in the health policies even inside the EU, each country approaches the crisis in a different way. Consequently, the policies range from opting for relatively loose ones relying on building up of natural immunity in the population, i.e. in Sweden, to extreme restrictive measures adopted in Hungary, diminishing human rights as well as democracy in the country.**
- **The Western Balkan countries' approach, although differing significantly in each country, belongs among the most restrictive ones. The countries with the highest number of infected persons (relative to the population size) are Serbia, North Macedonia and Montenegro.<sup>1</sup> In Montenegro, the situation has worsened in the past few weeks, as the country reported only a very small number at the beginning of the pandemic, and the government started introducing stricter measures, similarly to its neighbours.**

## Coronavirus crisis as an opportunity for the region's strongmen?

The current crisis and fight against the spread of the coronavirus provides political leaders with illiberal tendencies with an opportunity to adopt extreme measures while presenting them as necessary to ensure safety of the citizens. This risk is not exclusive just for the weak democracies of the Western Balkans but for all countries vulnerable to illiberalism through fragile institutions and democratic culture. Furthermore, a deeper analysis of the way each of the Western Balkan countries deals with the situation shows that while all of them adopt tough measures, the risks stemming from them are not equal and are very specific for each country.

### Serbia

As the situation is gravest in Serbia so are the adopted measures most controversial with some experts comparing it to Hungary.<sup>1</sup> The state of emergency in Serbia was declared on 15 March, however, the legality of it is being called into question. Apart from the condition set in the Constitution that the state of emergency can be

announced only when the survival of the country and its citizens is endangered, which is hard to evaluate in this unprecedented situation, lawyers are also critical of the way the decision was made. The introduction of the state of emergency has to be adopted by the Parliament, but in Serbia, the state of emergency was declared by the co-signatures of the Parliament Speaker, Prime Minister and the President<sup>2</sup>, all of them belonging to the same political party, SNS. Another worrisome aspect of the state of emergency in Serbia, resembling the situation in Hungary, is the lack of an end date for the state of emergency, a so-called sunset clause.

From the beginning the measures in Serbia were among the most restrictive in Europe. Apart from the generally adopted closure of borders, Serbia introduced a 12-hour police-enforced curfew (even stricter during the weekends) and people over 65 were forbidden to leave their homes at all.<sup>3</sup> What is, however, even more worrisome is the diminishing of citizens' rights supported with cell phone surveillance and the dominant and uncontrolled position President Vučić assumed in the crisis.<sup>4</sup> Aleksandar Vučić, despite the President's rather ceremonial role in Serbia's political system, has already had a complete control over the government and his party, the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS),

<sup>1</sup> AI: There are some worrying similarities between Hungary and Serbia, *N1 Srbija*, <http://rs.n1info.com/English/NEWS/a585228/Introduction-of-24-hour-curfew-must-be-well-explained.html>

<sup>2</sup> Lawyers question legality of state of emergency in Serbia, *N1 Srbija*, <http://rs.n1info.com/English/NEWS/a584598/Lawyers-ask-Constitutional-Court-to-rule-on-legality-of-state-of-emergency-in-Serbia.html>

<sup>3</sup> International Monetary Fund, Policy Responses to COVID-19, at <https://www.imf.org/en/Topics/imf-and-covid19/Policy-Responses-to-COVID-19>

<sup>4</sup> Stojanović, Dušan, Dismantling democracy? Virus used as excuse to quell dissent, *AP News*, <https://apnews.com/dffb2fa43d0c5fddc4508f2558603e67>

which even before the crisis had a dominant position in the Parliament. His and SNS's unchallenged position in Serbia and control of all institutions responsible for the system of checks and balances has already before the coronavirus crisis led to Serbia showing clear signs of a captured state.<sup>5</sup> However, under the state of emergency, many in Serbia fear that the ruling elite uses the situation to consolidate their control even further.<sup>6</sup>

The impact of the state of emergency on curtailing of democratic institutions in Serbia is most visible in the sphere of media. The government introduced a decision under which all local authorities, local crisis headquarters and medical institutions were not allowed to share information related to COVID-19 with the public and media. The task of sharing information was reserved only for the national crisis staff (headed by the Prime Minister Ana Brnabić).<sup>7</sup> The decision was harshly criticized not only in Serbia and by international NGOs but also by representatives of the EU institutions. Tanja Fajon, MEP, interpreted this measure as "the announcement of censorship."<sup>8</sup> Case in point, another scandal

was caused by the arrest of a journalist who reported about poor conditions in a hospital in Novi Sad, including a lack of protection equipment for the staff.<sup>9</sup> The journalist was released from custody and the regulation was withdrawn but restrictions and attacks on media continue. The independent TV channel N1 has become a target of attacks by politicians and pro-government media after an N1 reporter asked President Vučić whether he was tested for coronavirus after his son had tested positive, presenting this question as an attack on Vučić and an attempt to remove him from politics.<sup>10</sup> The same day, the government also announced that the news conferences held daily during the crisis by the national crisis staff will take place without journalists, who are asked to send their questions by e-mail before the meeting begins, thus neutralizing the Fourth Estate's most crucial function.<sup>11</sup> As the questions are sent by an e-mail and not through a call ("in real time"), this measure could potentially present another step towards censorship as the government could select which questions will be asked during the conference.

<sup>5</sup> When the Law Doesn't Rule: State Capture of the Judiciary, Prosecution, Police in Serbia, Open Society European Policy Institute, 2018, <https://www.opensocietyfoundations.org/publications/when-law-doesn-t-rule-state-capture-judiciary-prosecution-police-serbia>.

<sup>6</sup> SDS leader: Vucic abusing state of emergency for political purposes, *N1 Srbija*, <http://rs.n1info.com/English/NEWS/a588047/SDS-leader-Vucic-abusing-state-of-emergency-for-political-purposes.html>

<sup>7</sup> Stojanović, Milica, Serbian Govt Takes Control of Information Flow About Pandemic, *Balkan Insight*, <https://balkaninsight.com/2020/04/01/serbian-govt-takes-control-of-information-flow-about-pandemic/>

<sup>8</sup> Fajon: I hope no Serbia's official will use crisis to score political points, *N1 Srbija*,

<http://rs.n1info.com/English/NEWS/a587241/Fajon-warns-about-deteriorating-democracy-the-rule-of-law-and-media-freedom.html>

<sup>9</sup> Stojanović, Milica, Serbian Reporter's Arrest Over Pandemic Article Draws PM's Apology, *Balkan Insight*, <https://balkaninsight.com/2020/04/02/serbian-reporters-arrest-over-pandemic-article-draws-pms-apology/>

<sup>10</sup> Pro-government media assault on N1 over Vucic question, *N1 Srbija*, <http://rs.n1info.com/English/NEWS/a587841/Pro-government-media-assault-on-N1-over-Vucic-question.html>

<sup>11</sup> No journalists at daily pandemic briefings, Serbian government says, *N1 Srbija*, <http://rs.n1info.com/English/NEWS/a587867/No-journalists-at-daily-pandemic-briefings-Serbian-government-says.html>

The approach of the President and the government towards the current situation is widely criticized by local and international CSOs as well as European institutions.<sup>12</sup> Many fear that the adopted measures are disproportionate, unjustified and based on political rather than safety reasons. The statements and messages by the President and government do not contribute to calming of the society. For example, he “warned residents that Belgrade’s graveyards won’t be big enough to bury the dead if people ignore his government’s lockdown orders.”<sup>13</sup> At another occasion, users of the state-owned MTS mobile provider received a text urging them to stay home as “we are getting close to the Italian and Spanish scenario”, later revoked by the government as misinformation.<sup>14</sup> Another criticized step by the Serbian government was the transformation of exhibition hall in Belgrade into a makeshift hospital for infected patients filled with row-upon-row of 3,000 metal beds, triggering widespread public fear of the facility resembling a detention camp.<sup>15</sup>

## North Macedonia

In North Macedonia, another country in the Western Balkans hardest hit by the coronavirus pandemic, the measures have not been as

alarming as in Serbia but are nonetheless observed cautiously by the civil society in the country. The President Pendarovski declared a 30-day state of national emergency on 18 March, unlike in Serbia where there is no time limit on the emergency state. At the beginning, the measures introduced in North Macedonia were based on ensuring distancing in public places and recommending citizens to socially distance themselves. However, with an increase in number of people suspected of having been in contact with infected people violating obligatory self-isolation and spread of the infection, the government imposed strict curfews on weekends as well as during weekdays.<sup>16</sup>

While the situation regarding the curtailing of citizens’ freedoms and human rights is not as critical as in Serbia (and the adopted measures are not perceived with such criticism also due to the more liberal nature of the current government), CSOs argue for consultations of the measures with more actors and public before their introduction. It is also stressed that the potential prolongation of the state of emergency has to be discussed by the Parliament and the legislative bodies must not be bypassed by the

<sup>12</sup> MEPs warn Várhelyi of serious situation in Serbia in regard to human rights, *European Western Balkans*, <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2020/04/16/meps-warn-varhelyi-of-serious-situation-in-serbia-in-regard-to-human-rights/>

<sup>13</sup> AP: Vucic assumes full power under state of emergency, *N1 Srbija*, <http://rs.n1.info.com/English/NEWS/a583901/AP-Vucic-assumes-full-power-under-state-of-emergency.html>

<sup>14</sup> Serbian government fears the virus could resurface in health and social facilities but shouldn’t be expected elsewhere, *Euractiv*,

[https://www.euractiv.com/section/coronavirus/short\\_news/serbia-update-covid-19/](https://www.euractiv.com/section/coronavirus/short_news/serbia-update-covid-19/)

<sup>15</sup> Stojanović, Dušan, Dismantling democracy? Virus used as excuse to quell dissent, *AP News*, <https://apnews.com/dffb2fa43d0c5fddc4508f2558603e67>

<sup>16</sup> Serbia, North Macedonia Impose Harsh Weekend Curfews, *Balkan Insight*, <https://balkaninsight.com/2020/04/10/serbia-north-macedonia-impose-harsh-weekend-curfews/>

government.<sup>17</sup> Considering the government, it is also important to mention another comparison to Serbia. While the question about Serbian President's testing on COVID-19 caused controversy in Serbia, the virus has put into quarantine many of North Macedonia's political leaders. First the leaders of the country's two biggest political parties, Zoran Zaev (Social Democrats) and Hristijan Mickoski (VMRO DPMNE) have been put in mandatory home isolation after an interview with a journalist who later tested positive for the coronavirus.<sup>18</sup> Later in April, several other top officials, including the PM Spasovski, Deputy Prime Minister Bujar Osmani and several ministers went into a 2-week quarantine as well after a meeting with the mayor of Kumanovo who tested positive for the virus.<sup>19</sup>

Some concerns were raised by the launch of a contact-tracing app which should help to tackle the spread of COVID-19. The app warns users if they have come into contact with someone who has tested positive for the novel coronavirus, based on the distance between their mobile devices.<sup>20</sup> The identification of an infected person's mobile device is, however, based on

their voluntary submission of their data to the Ministry of Health. A similar approach to the use of digital technologies in combating the COVID-19 pandemic is something various EU countries' governments consider as well. In this context, Poland is the most problematic case. The government made it obligatory for those infected with coronavirus to use the app which could help to track their location.<sup>21</sup>

## Montenegro

As regards the risk to people's privacy protection, the most problematic case at this moment seems to be Montenegro. On 18 March, identities of coronavirus patients were published by social media users. Furthermore, on 22 March, the government itself published the names of people who had been ordered to self-isolate. Amid the wave of criticism from opposition parties and civil society, the government justified the decision arguing that lives and health of Montenegrin citizens were the priority and that some of the infected persons had not respected the order to self-isolate. The government has continued with this practice.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>17</sup> Institute for Democracy Societas Civilis Skopje, Reaction: The RSM Assembly must meet to decide on the state of emergency, at

<https://idscs.org.mk/mk/2020/04/15/%d1%80%d0%b5%d0%b0-%d0%ba%d1%86%d0%b8%d1%98%d0%b0-%d1%81%d0%be%d0%b1%d1%80%d0%b0%d0%bd%d0%b8%d0%b5%d1%82%d0%be-%d0%bd%d0%b0-%d1%80%d1%81%d0%bc-%d0%bc%d0%be%d1%80%d0%b0-%d0%b4%d0%b0-%d1%81%d0%b5-%d1%81/>

<sup>18</sup> Popović, Sofija, COVID-19 in the WB: Weekend curfew extended to 60 hours in Serbia and North Macedonia, *European Western Balkans*,

<https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2020/04/10/covid-19-in-the-wb-weekend-curfew-extended-to-60-hours-in-serbia-and-north-macedonia/>

<sup>19</sup> N.Macedonia: Premier, other ministers to be isolated, *Anadolu Agency*, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/europe/nmacedonia-premier-other-ministers-to-be-isolated/1807617>

<sup>20</sup> Stojkovski, Bojan, North Macedonia Leads Region in COVID-19 Tracing App, *Balkan Insight*, <https://balkaninsight.com/2020/04/16/north-macedonia-leads-region-in-covid-19-tracing-app/>

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Kajosevic, Samir, Montenegro Medic Arrested for Publishing List of Coronavirus Patients, *Balkan Insight*,

What makes the adopted measures in Montenegro (including the recently introduced curfew) even more problematic is the fact that the state of emergency has not been declared in the country yet. In this context, it is highly controversial that the government is currently the sole decision-maker with the parliamentary sessions suspended since 13 March, together with all other public gatherings.<sup>23</sup>

## Albania

In the other three Western Balkan countries, Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Kosovo, which suffered from the COVID-19 pandemic to a lesser extent<sup>24</sup>, the parliaments have not been suspended yet. However, the way the governments are dealing with the crisis is problematic in each of them as well.

Albania had been under a state of natural emergency since November, following a disastrous earthquake, and the spread of the

coronavirus provided a reason for its prolongation for another 30 days. The government, backed by the parliament dominated by the ruling Socialist Party,<sup>25</sup> introduced early on a set of very restrictive measures including a 3-day general curfew<sup>26</sup> and very high fines for violation of the introduced measures and three-year bans for car drivers if they breach restrictions on movement.<sup>27</sup> The PM even announced that Albanians returning to Albania from abroad would have to cover all costs related to the 14-day quarantine.<sup>28</sup> The flights for repatriation are organized by the Air Albania airline company and returnees will then be quarantined in hotels arranged by the government. The returning nationals will have to pay for the flights as well as accommodation in the hotels themselves. The measures are meant to discourage people to return to Albania without any serious reason and potentially risk spreading the virus.<sup>29</sup>

<https://balkaninsight.com/2020/04/08/montenegro-medical-arrested-for-publishing-list-of-coronavirus-patients/>

<sup>23</sup> Kajosevic, Samir, Montenegro Govt Accused of Flouting Constitution Amid Crisis, *Balkan Insight*, <https://balkaninsight.com/2020/03/31/montenegro-govt-accused-of-flouting-constitution-amid-crisis/>

<sup>24</sup> As of 15 April, the number of confirmed cases was 1086 in Bosnia and Herzegovina with 40 deaths, 475 in Albania, with 24 deaths, and 387 in Kosovo with 8 deaths. World Health Organization [https://www.who.int/docs/default-source/coronaviruse/situation-reports/20200415-sitrep-86-covid-19.pdf?sfvrsn=c615ea20\\_4](https://www.who.int/docs/default-source/coronaviruse/situation-reports/20200415-sitrep-86-covid-19.pdf?sfvrsn=c615ea20_4)

<sup>25</sup> Several opposition MPs left the Parliament in February 2019 following protests against PM Rama based on accusations of electoral fraud and corruption. Opposition parties regularly boycott elections and the EU conditioned the opening of accession negotiations with Albania by adoption of a profound electoral reform.

<sup>26</sup> Erebara, Gjergj, Albania Announces New "War" Measures Against Coronavirus, *Balkan Insight*,

<https://balkaninsight.com/2020/03/12/albania-close-factories-impose-curfew-in-war-against-new-coronavirus/>

<sup>27</sup> Erebara, Gjergj, Albania Adopts Punitive Fines for Breaching Coronavirus Restrictions, *Balkan Insight*, <https://balkaninsight.com/2020/03/16/albania-mounts-millionaire-fines-against-covid-19/>

<sup>28</sup> Albania to charge families for coronavirus quarantine, *N1 Srbija*, <http://rs.n1info.com/English/NEWS/a586236/Albania-to-charge-families-for-coronavirus-quarantine.html>

<sup>29</sup> Albania: Anyone wishing to enter the country to be placed in 14-day quarantine and cover related costs, *Independent Balkan News Agency*, <https://balkaneu.com/albania-anyone-wishing-to-enter-the-country-to-be-placed-in-14-day-quarantine-and-cover-related-costs/>, Stranded Albanians Returning Home Will Pay for Flights, Two-Week Quarantine in Hotels Arranged by Government, *Exit News*, <https://exit.al/en/2020/04/16/stranded-albanians-returning-home-will-pay-for-flights-two-week-quarantine-in-hotels-arranged-by-government/>

Civil society has voiced its concerns especially over the Prime Minister Rama's ongoing war against the media. A wave of criticism from domestic as well as international actors was caused by the recent attempt of the PM to introduce law changes which would allow for the control over the online media in Albania.<sup>30</sup> The controversial law was submitted for a review to the Venice Commission of the Council of Europe and some EU member states require the law to be amended in accordance with the Commission's opinion before opening of the accession talks with Albania.<sup>31</sup> The current coronavirus crisis thus raises concerns whether the PM will not abuse the situation in order to restrict Albanian media even further. A controversial step in this regard was a message from the PM Rama distributed to the users of the Vodafone mobile network, which, apart from calling on the citizens to wash their hands properly and limit their movement outside, also advised users to protect themselves from the media. Another mobile network, Telekom Albania, which cooperates with the UNDP to provide information related to COVID-19,<sup>32</sup> sent

a milder warning, advising people to protect themselves from false information.<sup>33</sup>

## Bosnia and Herzegovina

In Bosnia and Herzegovina, the management of the COVID-19 crisis in the country is complicated by the high decentralization of the country, especially by the autonomy of the Serb-majority Republika Srpska. The entity continued its close coordination with Serbia but also struggles with internal disagreements between the Serbian majority and Bosniak political parties over the declaration of the state of emergency with the Bosniak citizens voicing concerns from potential restrictions on movement between entities.<sup>34</sup>

As in many of the countries of the region, the government in Republika Srpska adopted some controversial measures potentially introducing censorship. At the beginning of April, the government of the Serb-led entity introduced a decree prohibiting the spread of panic and fake news through media and social networks, with the punishment of fines ranging from 500 to 4,500 EUR.<sup>35</sup> The extent to which this decree

<sup>30</sup> Erebara, Gjergj, Venice Commission to Probe Albania's Media Laws, *Balkan Insight*, <https://balkaninsight.com/2020/01/23/venice-commission-to-judge-over-albania-controversial-media-law/>

<sup>31</sup> Dutch MPs: Controversial 'Anti-defamation' Law Must Be Amended Before EU Accession Talks Start, *Exit News*, <https://exit.al/en/2020/03/24/dutch-mps-controversial-anti-defamation-law-must-be-amended-before-eu-accession-talks-start/>

<sup>32</sup> UNDP Albania, COVID-19: UNDP joins forces with Telekom to provide health information to the Albanian public, <https://www.al.undp.org/content/albania/en/home/presscenter/pressreleases/2019/covid-19--undp-joins-forces-with-telekom-to-provide-health-infor.html>

<sup>33</sup> Erebara, Gjergj, Rama Takes his War on Media to Albanians' Phones, *Balkan Insight*, <https://balkaninsight.com/2020/03/13/albania-premier-urges-citizens-to-protect-themselves-from-the-media/>

<sup>34</sup> Danijel Kovačević, State of Emergency 'on Hold' in Republika Srpska, *Balkan Insight*, <https://balkaninsight.com/2020/03/31/state-of-emergency-on-hold-in-republika-srpska/>

<sup>35</sup> Danijel Kovačević, Bosnia Trying to Censor Information About Pandemic, Journalists Say, *Balkan Insight*, <https://balkaninsight.com/2020/04/08/bosnia-trying-to-censor-information-about-pandemic-journalists-say/>

curtains the freedom of information is well demonstrated on the first person who was fined under this measure, a medical doctor and opposition party member, Maja Stojic Dragojevic, who was fined for writing on Facebook about the lack of necessary hospital equipment in Republika Srpska and the entity's lack of preparedness.<sup>36</sup>

## Kosovo

The country paying already the highest political cost of the pandemic appears to be Kosovo, with the vote of no confidence against its new government passing on 25 March. Soon after the new government was established, following October 2019 elections and five months of negotiations, it became clear that the incumbent PM, Albin Kurti, and the President, Hashim Thaci, have incompatible visions regarding the dialogue with Serbia and potential agreement including the possibility of an exchange of territory between Kosovo and Serbia. The second strongest government party's representatives, LDK, held a meeting with the President in March, followed by their initiation of the no confidence vote in the Parliament. The official reason was PM Kurti's dismissal of the Interior Minister from LDK, Agim Veliu, over the disagreement on declaring the state of

emergency. While the PM Kurti refused it as a step causing an unnecessary panic, the Minister of Interior supported President Thaci's call for its declaration. The state of emergency would strengthen Thaci's position further,<sup>37</sup> as the President "may request meetings of the Kosovo Security Council and chairs them during a State of Emergency."<sup>38</sup> For now, Kurti's government remains in the office temporarily and further options are being discussed.

While the future of the country's leadership is unsure, Kosovo has gradually adopted strict measures in the fight against the coronavirus, the most recent one allowing the citizens to move outside only in an hour-and-half window and with an ID. The time window is assigned to each citizen according to their ID number.<sup>39</sup>

Pristina authorities, however, do not have a complete control over all Kosovo citizens. As usual, the Serb-led northern Kosovo municipalities are guided also in the time of the coronavirus crisis from Belgrade. Serbia provides the existing parallel institutions in northern Kosovo with test kits and the patients with severe symptoms are sent to Serbian hospitals.<sup>40</sup> In relation to the problematic situation of media, the arrest of the KoSSev portal<sup>41</sup> editor, Tatjana Lazarevic, in North Mitrovica in northern Kosovo

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Kosovo's Parliament Topples Government In No-Confidence Vote, *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, <https://www.rferl.org/a/kosovo-parliament-dismisses-government-noconfidence-kurti/30509600.html>

<sup>38</sup> Constitution of the Republic of Kosovo, <http://www.kryeministri-ks.net/repository/docs/Constitution1Kosovo.pdf>

<sup>39</sup> Kosovo tightens measures, 90-minute walk a day with ID, *N1 Srbija*, <http://rs.n1info.com/English/NEWS/a588849/Only-half-an-hour-walk-a-day-in-Kosovo-as-of-Wednesday.html>

<sup>40</sup> Stojanović Milica, Bami Xhorxhina, Belgrade Takes Charge of Kosovo Serbs With COVID-19, *Balkan Insight*, <https://balkaninsight.com/2020/03/30/belgrade-takes-charge-of-kosovo-serbs-with-covid-19/>

<sup>41</sup> An online news portal covering primarily northern Kosovo

caused criticism from international community. She was arrested and brought in for questioning on her way to the local medical centre treating patients with COVID-19 for violating the curfew, despite the fact she presented her press ID and was on an assignment. Journalists are supposed to be exempt from the mandatory curfew but allegedly the editor now faces criminal proceedings<sup>42</sup>

## Conclusion

When looking at the measures adopted in the Western Balkan countries in the context of the coronavirus crisis, it is clear that they belong among the toughest ones in Europe with the hardest impact on citizens' rights and freedoms. In most European countries, the governments opted for lockdowns, closing of restaurants, some shops and other venues and advise or order their citizens to stay at home as much as possible and self-isolate. However, the citizens still usually enjoy the freedom of movement and can go to shops, run necessary errands or take walks in parks as they wish. In the Western Balkans, curfews are wide-spread, sometimes lasting up to three days, and their violations are severely punished. In Serbia, older citizens are not allowed to leave their homes at all. Meanwhile, some governments use the extraordinary situation to strengthen their grip on political power and to limit any freedom of information and constructive work of the media

in their countries. CSOs as well as European institutions watch the situation carefully and often warn about the danger for democracy in the region.

While the measures adopted in the fight against the spread of the COVID-19 present a threat to democracy and freedom everywhere and the developments should be observed cautiously even in developed Western democracies, in the Western Balkans they seem to rather follow trends present already before the pandemic. The concentration of power in the hands of the government, erosion of the system of checks and balances, opaque policies of secrecy and attacks on media as well as violations of citizens' basic rights and freedoms under different causes had been frequent targets of criticism against the region's leaders by domestic and international actors long before the coronavirus appeared. The current crisis just equips the political elites with better tools and a thin veneer of legitimacy in the name of security. However, this is not the case only in the EU's neighbourhood. The time-unlimited rule by decree in Hungary, elections in Poland as well as proposals for wide surveillance of the citizens in many countries seem not to appear out of nowhere, but rather follow up on previous controversial policies threatening the liberal democracy and respect for freedoms.

The EU has to observe the next developments in the EU member states as well

<sup>42</sup> Watchdogs Concerned Over 'Pressure' Put On Kosovar News Portal Amid Pandemic, *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*,

<https://www.rferl.org/a/kosovo-news-portal-under-pressure-amid-coronavirus-outbreak/30549138.html>

as the candidate countries very carefully and do as much as possible to ensure the adopted measures restricting democracy will not be implemented any longer than necessary. In case of the Member States, this should follow up on the procedures already started against Hungary and Poland and apply them to other countries as well, if deemed as appropriate. In the case of the candidate countries and Western Balkans generally, the EU needs to use the newly gained momentum in the enlargement policy, established by the new enlargement methodology and positive decision on opening of accession talks with Albania and North Macedonia. These were the steps increasing the credibility of the European perspective for the region, providing the EU with a new leverage in relation with the Western Balkans. The possibility of earlier access to some EU funds and inclusion of negotiating countries in the EU Solidarity Fund in response to the coronavirus crisis and its impact on economy, hand in hand with the new methodology's emphasis on rule of law and democratic standards, is now more critical than

ever. This is an opportunity for the EU to show that not only talks the talk but also walks the walk; that the conditions are truly rigid and no further democratic backsliding will be tolerated. If the EU's reaction is not timely and appropriate, instead of speeding up the Western Balkans' integration into the EU, there is a tangible risk of further loss of influence over the region. As the recent history showed, any drop in EU's engagement and vision for the region creates a space for Eastern powers to step in and steer the developments in the region in their preferred way. The EU would then risk potential losing in the battle for its closest neighbourhood for good.



Co-funded by the  
Europe for Citizens Programme  
of the European Union

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